

## EFFECTIVE PROTECTION:

### KEY TO SUCCESS IN HK'S BATTLE AGAINST SARS

--some ideas and recommendations in relation to the war against SARS

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#### 1. Introduction

Today, Hong Kong has at long last freed herself from the problem of SARS, although at the expense of 298 lives and huge economic loss. It is time we look back on the various stages of the outbreak and learn from positive and negative experience gained in preparation for possible future outbreaks. It is no use claiming credits or putting blame on others. We hope the investigation, review and findings this time will serve the purpose of "learning from experience", "suit the remedy to the ailment" and "heal the sick and save life."

#### 2. (a) On the SARS information flow

Hong Kong had learnt of the outbreak in Guangzhou as early as Jan., 2003. From the chronological development of events it could be shown that as far as

exchange of information on SARS is concerned, HK had been well aware of the situation both in HK and in neighboring cities.

However, it appeared that the HKSAR Government and senior executives were at that time too busy dealing with financial deficits and civil service pay cut so little attention was paid to this highly contagious SARS disease: its clinical presentation and characteristics, diagnosis and differential diagnosis, protective measures, treatment, tracking and related scientific study, etc.

This resulted in a general indifferent attitude towards this disease at the initial stage, which in turn failed to alert the health authorities, hospitals and frontline health care staff before it was too late.

(b) Lessons learnt from isolation facilities and equipment

Prevention and treatment are the keys to successful control of outbreak, and our first step should be prevention. It is because of the failure to and delay in adopting suitable and timely preventive measures at the early and middle stages of outbreak that led to problems.

(c) Lessons learnt from human resources and deployment

From experience it can be shown that ICU support played a vital role in the present battle against SARS. However, with the infection of quite a number of ICU nurses in the course of battle, the gross shortage of properly trained ICU staff was highlighted. For example, when it was necessary to open 3 additional ICU wards in PMH, the hospital was forced to transfer nurses with nil ICU experience to work in the newly set up ICU ward.

(d) Lessons learnt from infection control concept, information

It is pitiful to note that the painful experience of PWH could not serve to prevent similar recurrence. This is really a great defeat as far as infection control was concerned. There are many reasons why we fell into the same pit again and again, among them the lopsided stress on droplet infection and little attention was drawn to contact infection, and the disorganized and uncontrolled development and issue of information and guidelines, especially at the early stage of the outbreak.

(e) Lessons learnt from ward design and layout

The outbreak this time highlights the gross inadequacy of design in public hospitals, which greatly affected the effective execution of isolation care. Other factors to note included serious shortage of infection ward, lack of independent

room at general wards, poor ventilation in wards, and the irrational design and layout of wards, which very often increased the chance of cross infection.

(f) Lessons learnt from management system

Problems in this area include:

- \* bureaucratic and stiffened management structure
- \* outdated management culture
- \* problems in the management, training and deployment of nurses: nurses only played a minor role in hospital management, and the previous professional partnership between nurses and doctors was gradually becoming a subordinate and boss relationship.

3. Overall review should be conducted on HK's health care system

The Government should actively consider problems such as:

- \* How to establish feasible integrated Chinese/western medicine mechanism?
- \* How to enhance primary and community health care? What's the purpose?
- \* How to develop management and monitoring system of aged homes, and improve environment hygiene and service quality?
- \* How to enforce effective communication, cooperation and complementation of private and public health care sector?
- \* How to develop and execute overall public health policy?

4. SARS Battle highlights the importance of civil servants

Hong Kong is fortunate this time to have a team of devoted and diligent civil servants from all departments, who voluntarily give up their time and spend extra effort to provide frontline and supporting service in the fight against SARS. The Government should give second thoughts in going ahead with the "small Government" policy. By contracting out public service the Government is virtually cutting down its ability to mobilize a huge workforce in times of need.

5. Conclusion

- (1) Infection has no bounds. Hong Kong should step up her liaison with overseas countries and China in the communication of epidemiological information.
- (2) Stringent isolation measures should be adopted for infectious diseases. The measures should be taken early, comprehensively and continuously.
- (3) Steps must be taken to ensure the early, appropriate and fair deployment of suitable and trained manpower in times of outbreak and in normal times.
- (4) The management culture should really put human beings on the top (focus on physical and mental well being of patients and staff), and satisfy the three

needs: patient service need, professional development need and personal development need.

- (5) Fully understand and bring out the potential of all ranks of staff (especially the baseline and frontline staff) by allowing them ample chance to voice out their views.
- (6) Look into the direction of development of HK's health care system in a reasonable manner, set distinct and clear targets and feasible time table for implementation.
- (7) Promote the building up of an efficient, high quality, loyal and committed civil service workforce. Outsourcing and privatization should be critically examined.